

‘Do not despair at your fate’: Carl von Clausewitz in French Captivity, 1806–1807

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Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz is widely regarded as an acute observer and contemporary witness of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Yet his own experience of French captivity in 1806-1807 – well documented in his letters to his fiancée Marie von Brühl – has not been studied in depth. It gives fascinating insights not only into Clausewitz' own evaluation of his time in captivity, but also in the inner workings of the broader transformation of war during that period.

Peter Paret states in his seminal intellectual biography of Clausewitz that his time in captivity had a great impact on his career and his life. Yet, he only devotes six print pages of his biography to that phase of Clausewitz's life.¹ What stands out for Paret is 'the hurt to his [Clausewitz's] patriotism' induced by the experience of defeat and captivity and his ensuing identification with the Prussian state.² In contrast to Paret, Donald Stoker in his Clausewitz biography recognises that the reference point of Clausewitz patriotism during his time in captivity was not necessarily the Prussian state, but the German nation.³ Yet Stoker devotes hardly any more pages than Paret to exploring the tension between these two reference points.

More recently, two biographies have given more attention to Clausewitz's time in captivity. Vanya Bellinger covers it at length in her biography of Marie von Clausewitz. Bellinger emphasises the degree to which the correspondence between Carl and Marie was subject to French surveillance.⁴ She concludes that 'Unable to talk openly about politics, the two lovers used the time and their letters to share their intimate memories, dreams, and wishes, and to reveal to one another their aspirations.'⁵ While Bellinger's assertion about French surveillance is correct, this still did not prevent Carl from conveying to Marie his impressions about the French – and, by extension, about the German – national characters, a deeply political subject. Bruno Colson's Clausewitz biography provides the most extensive and detailed coverage of Clausewitz's time in captivity. Colson devotes extensive attention to Clausewitz' 'educational journey' to France and later Switzerland. In particular, he highlights that in his writings

¹ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, his Theories, and his Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 126-131.

² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 127-128. Cf. Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 83-95, which does not explore this issue either.

³ Donald Stoker, *Clausewitz: His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67.

⁴ Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz: The Woman behind the Making of On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 76.

⁵ Bellinger, *Marie von Clausewitz*, 78.

from captivity, Clausewitz was at pains to debunk the dominant opinion according to which the French, and in particular the Napoleonic, system of war had made the French invincible.⁶ His work is an indispensable source for analysing Clausewitz's writings from 1806-07. This article seeks to push Colson's line of thought further by highlighting the extent to which Clausewitz' construction of the French national character went hand in glove with an exploration of the 'German' national character, which was for the time of his captivity, the main reference point of Clausewitz' patriotism.

Clausewitz' experience in French captivity epitomizes the uneven and incomplete transformation from ancien régime practices of captivity in war towards a prisoner of war regime that reflected the political demands and sensitivities emerging from the nationalization of war. The French Revolution attempted to discontinue ancien régime practices, such as the exchange of prisoners and the release of officers on parole. Yet Clausewitz, in his role as adjutant to Prince August, enjoyed aristocratic privileges in captivity that closely mirrored these old regime traditions. Their status, however, had become inevitably politicized by a number of decrees that the French National Convention had adopted during the revolution. Clausewitz's personal experience, though largely structured by old regime practices, reflected this politicization to the extent that it threw up questions of political identity – that of the foe, France, as well as that of Clausewitz's own side, which he, for the time of his captivity, constructed as 'German' rather than 'Prussian'.

While Clausewitz was distraught at having to accompany prince August to France after both had been taken captive in the aftermath of the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt in October 1806, he used the time of his captivity to study the enemy – France – at close quarters. He eagerly studied French culture and architecture. His letters to Marie betray a strong anti-French patriotism. However, one would be mistaken to assume that his criticism of France was aimed at the revolutionary transformation of French society and government. On the contrary, Clausewitz characterized the France he encountered in 1806-1807 as the true bastion of ancien régime policies and the French people as culturally backward.

The company of Prince August did nothing to lift Clausewitz' spirits. Having grown up at the Prussian court, August had been profoundly 'Frenchified' in his education and his manners. Clausewitz equated the negative traits of his companion with what he regarded as the deficiencies of the French national character. The France that Clausewitz encountered epitomized the roots of a much wider late aristocratic malaise and cultural decadence that had gripped

⁶ Bruno Colson, *Clausewitz* (Paris: Perrin: 2016), 85-86.

Europe before the French Revolution. Clausewitz' assessment was that the French Revolution had not overcome this late aristocratic malaise, and that the French were unable to shake off their decadent national character. His observations during his time in captivity would feature prominently in musings about the differences in the French and the German 'national characters'. While the French had dabbled in republicanism, they were neither culturally nor mentally suited to it; hence the French Revolution had not had a lasting societal impact. Clausewitz contrasted this with the German national character and concluded that it was the Germans who were culturally and mentally geared to a republican political system.⁷

In sum, Clausewitz' experience of French captivity led him to question and to reverse the political characteristics traditionally ascribed to France (=revolutionary) and Prussia (=absolutist). This gave him the hope that, in spite of its crushing defeat in October 1806, Prussia could regenerate itself and eventually prevail against Napoleonic France.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the next section will survey the background of policies and practices surrounding captivity in war and its transformation during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The third part of the paper introduces Clausewitz's background and his writings up to 1806. The fourth section is devoted to his letters from captivity, which will be evaluated in the fifth part of the paper. The conclusion will summarise the arguments and findings and will point to future avenues of research.

Captivity in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

The fate of prisoners in early modern European warfare consisted of one of four options: immediate release from the battlefield, release for ransom or in exchange for prisoners from one's own side, release on parole, or impressment into the captor's armed forces.⁸ Sieges, which formed an important aspect of war in early modern Europe, and rebellions, did not partake of this repertoire of prisoner treatment, and survivors often met a much grimmer fate.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', in Hans Rothfels (ed.) *Politische Schriften und Briefe* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 46. However, Clausewitz also noted that Prussia's geopolitical situation meant that it could ill afford a political system based on managed dissent.

⁸ Sibylle Scheipers, 'The Status and Protections of Prisoners of War and Detainees', Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 396.

Release from the battlefield happened in situations when one or more of the warring parties were unable to take prisoners. Prisoner exchanges were more desirable when circumstances allowed for initial captivity. With the evolution of absolutist states in seventeenth century Europe a cartel system developed to organize the practice of exchange for ransom or man-for-man.⁹ Release on parole was an option that was only open to officers. They were released to their home country provided that they gave their word of honour (*parole d'honneur*) not to return to the fight for the duration of the conflict. Where this was not feasible, officers 'enjoyed relatively comfortable conditions ... in some form of house arrest'.¹⁰ Finally, impressment into the captor's armed forces was a common practice for rank and file soldiers, whom early modern rulers frequently viewed as mercenaries lacking political loyalty and hence as an asset that would fight just as well or as badly on one's own side. If successful, impressment had the obvious advantage of simultaneously boosting one's own manpower resources while depriving the enemy without having to create burdensome administrative structures such as the ones that were required for exchanges. However, as Frederick II learnt after he had impressed 18,000 Saxon soldiers into the Prussian army in 1756, soldiers' loyalties were a force that could not be discarded: within five months, the majority of them had deserted and had formed a contingent of the French army.¹¹

Profound changes to these established practices came about in the course of the French Revolutionary Wars. On 26 May 1794, the French National Convention issued a 'no quarter' decree towards British, Hanoverian, Hessian and Spanish captives. The rationale behind this decree was that the British and their allies were singled out as particularly 'traitorous' enemies of the French Revolution, as their comparatively more liberal political system made their enmity to revolutionary France look like an especially poignant betrayal. The decree was never implemented on the battlefield as the 'white' veteran elements of the French Revolutionary army continued to apply ancien régime practices towards captives.¹² But its substance was revolutionary to the extent that, for the first time in the history of war, prisoners were differentiated along the lines of (quasi-) nationality. What ensued was a struggle between old and new, between the politicization of the prisoner issue emerging from revolutionary Paris and the reassertion of professionalism among the officer corps, which became even more pronounced in the Napoleonic era. Officers attempted to negotiate formal

⁹ Peter Wilson, 'Prisoners in Early Modern European Warfare', Sibylle Scheipers (ed) *Prisoners in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Ibid., 52.

¹² Scheipers, 'The Status and Protections of Prisoners of War', 398.

exchange cartels with their opponents, which, however, failed.¹³ Informal exchanges of prisoners did take place, though. Gerhard von Scharnhorst, for instance, Clausewitz' mentor at the *Institut für die jungen Offiziere der Berliner Inspektion* (succeeded by the *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* in 1810) between 1801 and 1804, and chief of staff of the Duke of Brunswick during the 1806 campaigns, was exchanged immediately after his capture subsequent to the Battle of Auerstedt.¹⁴

The no-quarter decree of 1794 was by no means the only way in which revolutionary Paris attempted to uproot existing traditions concerning the treatment of prisoners in war. On 25 May 1793, the National Convention had prohibited the practice of impressment, which it deemed contrary to the spirit of the 'nation in arms'. Of course, Napoleon's practice of introducing conscription in conquered satellite states and using the armies of those states whom he had forced into an alliance made a mockery of these sensitivities.¹⁵ In fact, it was these practices that prompted Clausewitz and his fellow military reformers in 1812 to resign their commission in the Prussian officer corps and to join – in Clausewitz' case – the Russian fight against Napoleon. Clausewitz' motives as he described them in his *Bekenntnisdenschrift* of 1812 are very close to those that presented the rationale for the National Convention decree of 25 May 1793.¹⁶

Moreover, on 22 June 1793 the National Convention had abolished the practice of release on parole. French officers were actively encouraged to break their parole. While the majority of French officers abided by their *parole d'honneur*, sufficient numbers of them did not. This prompted Britain to create 'parole towns' across its territory, which hosted French officers released on parole but now prevented from returning to France.¹⁷ These parole towns moved closer to the practice of detaining prisoners of war for the duration of the war, even though they were not yet regulated by specific laws of war.

The upshot of the National Convention's decrees on prisoners was the disruption of established traditions in the treatment of prisoners taken on the battlefield. The narrative of the 'nation in arms' was at odds with the traditional practices of prisoner exchanges, impressment and release on parole. This break with the past paved the way for the prisoner of war regime that would develop into the twentieth century, based on long-term captivity in the hands of the opponent. At

¹³ Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions: French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1803-1814', *History* 89/3 (2004), 372.

¹⁴ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 126.

¹⁵ Scheipers, 'The Status and Protections of Prisoners of War', 399.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, 'Bekenntnisdenschrift', in Rothfels (ed.), *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, 80-119.

¹⁷ Daly, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions', 370ff.

the same time, the break was patchy and incomplete. Clausewitz' own experience of captivity illustrates this. He was detained in his role as adjutant to Prince August and as such shared the aristocratic privileges of captivity that the French granted to August. At the same time, his letters to his fiancée reflect that he was constantly hoping to be exchanged and thus eventually to be able to return to Berlin before the conclusion of a peace treaty between France and Prussia. However, his hopes were dashed time and again, and it was only the conclusion of the Tilsit Peace Treaty of 9 July 1807 that brought about August and Clausewitz' release.

Clausewitz in 1806: the young officer-scholar

When he was taken captive by the French near Prenzlau, Clausewitz was 26 years old. He had spent the majority of his lifetime in the Prussian army. Born in 1780 in Burg near Magdeburg into a family whose aristocratic heritage was disputed, he had joined the Prussian army at the age of twelve.¹⁸ He had fought in Prussia's Rhine campaigns of 1793 and 1794. Clausewitz had always shown a keenness for education, but he remained an autodidact until he entered the *Institut für die jungen Offiziere* in Berlin, from where he graduated in 1804 as top of the class. Throughout his student years at the *Institut*, its director Gerhard von Scharnhorst, who soon had spotted Clausewitz' talent, acted as his mentor. It was Scharnhorst who recommended Clausewitz as adjutant to Prince August. This would prove to be fateful for the way in which Clausewitz experienced his captivity in France. August, a year Clausewitz' senior, was the youngest son of Prince Ferdinand of Prussia and a nephew of Frederick II. As we shall see in more detail in the next section, even though Clausewitz showed respect and loyalty to the prince, August's personality often frustrated him.

August and Clausewitz were taken captive after Prussia's crushing defeat in the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt. August's unit had been part of General von Kalckreuth's reserve corps. On 13 October, it had received orders to join Frederick William III's army in Auerstedt. Arriving there on 14 October, Clausewitz was involved in August's attempt to mount a counter-attack on the Napoleonic forces. August rated Clausewitz' performance highly in a subsequent letter to Frederick William III. In spite of August's units' best efforts, the battle was lost, even though the counter-attack allowed the majority of the Prussian

¹⁸ In one of his letters from captivity, he wrote at length to his fiancée Marie von Brühl, whose family's social status far outranked that of the Clausewitzs, about the anxiety his family's disputed aristocratic heritage caused him and how he feared that Marie could see him as an impostor. Carl to Marie, 13 December 1806, Karl Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz: Ein Leben in Briefen und Tagebuchblättern* (Berlin: Verlag Martin Warneck, 1916), 73-74.

troops to escape.¹⁹ What followed was a 14-day tour from Auerstedt via Halberstadt and Neuruppin to Prenzlau, where August surrendered on 28 October. He was allowed a short sojourn in Berlin to recover from his wounds. On 30 December 1806 August was sent into French captivity in Nancy, and Clausewitz accompanied him.

His post as August's adjutant had brought Clausewitz into contact with the Prussian court. This is where he first encountered Marie von Brühl, who was lady in waiting to Princess Charlotte. Marie's mother initially viewed Clausewitz as an undesirable suitor; however, Clausewitz' mobilization in 1806 and his departure from Berlin seem to have softened Mme von Brühl's rejection. She allowed Marie to write to Carl and to receive his letters.

In 1806, Marie and Scharnhorst were the two most important figures in Clausewitz' life. Marie was connected to the court, but she was fiercely critical of Frederick William III's indecision and his failure to mount a successful defensive campaign against Napoleon. Like the military reformers gathered around Scharnhorst, Marie was intensely patriotic, and believed that it was Prussia's lack of political leadership and its societal decadence rather French invincibility that had led to Prussia's decline. The military reform movement around Scharnhorst, with Clausewitz as one of its central members, was led by the conviction that Prussia's ancien régime structures were no match for French expansionism fuelled by the *levée en masse*. The reformers did not advocate following the example of the French Revolution. Any support that the revolution had enjoyed in some political quarters across Europe had largely given way to disenchantment after the excesses of the terror of 1793-94 and Napoleon's coup of 1799. Yet the reformers could not fail to realize the vast power the French state had harnessed once it had mobilized the people into its war effort.

At the time of his capture, Clausewitz had started writing on questions of strategy and military history. His earliest preserved text is an assignment entitled 'Auflösung der 26ten Aufgabe', presenting a solution to a set tactical problem.²⁰ In 1804 he had drafted a collection of brief essays on strategy.²¹ In addition, he had completed a study of the campaigns of Gustav Adolphus.²² He had also drafted a text in French, 'Considération sur la manière de faire la guerre

¹⁹ Colson, *Clausewitz*, 62.

²⁰ Clausewitz, 'Auflösung der 26ten Aufgabe', Werner Hahlweg (ed.) *Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe* Vol I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 57-58.

²¹ Clausewitz, *Strategie aus dem Jahr 1804*, Eberhard Kessel (ed.) (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937).

²² Carl von Clausewitz, *Gustav Adolphs Feldzüge von 1630-1632, Hinterlassene Werke* vol 9, Berlin: Dümmler, 1837).

à la France', a discussion of the options of forming an alliance against Napoleon in the interstice between the second and the third coalition.²³ 1805 saw his first publication in the *Neue Bellona*, a military journal widely read among German officers, where Clausewitz contributed a critique of the Enlightenment military thinker Adam Heinrich von Bülow.²⁴ None of these texts dealt specifically with France or its way in war at the time. The only explicit mention of revolutionary France in Clausewitz' pre-captivity writings can be found in a short and unpublished note, in which he compared France to the Roman Empire – a common comparison at the time – and opined that in contrast to Rome, which had granted conquered peoples a relative degree of cultural freedom, Napoleon insisted on assimilation.²⁵

While he was in captivity, Clausewitz drafted three 'letters' for publication in another journal, *Minerva*, about the campaign of 1806. In the third of these 'letters', of 19 February 1807, he pondered French tactical innovations that he had observed at close quarters during the campaign, in particular the system of decentralized marches that allowed the French to travel at much greater speed than the Prussians.²⁶

Before, and into the early stages of captivity, Clausewitz thus had not considered France's political context or its 'national character' in any depth. He did concede that Napoleon had introduced impressive tactical innovations, but he had no clear grasp yet of France as a political or a social entity. This was to change with his sojourn in France. Even though he left Berlin with a heavy heart at the end of December 1806, he travelled to France determined to gain knowledge and understanding of the enemy. Clausewitz was by no means objective in his perspective on France, and he would have found it unpatriotic not to be unashamedly partisan in his observations. France – as a nation – was the enemy in the wake of the revolution. Consequently, Clausewitz turned his attention to studying France's national character, rather than the interest of its dynastic rulers. Even though the conditions of his captivity were reminiscent of old regime practices, Clausewitz was well aware of the politicization along national lines of prisoners in the wake of the French Revolution. This threw up the question of the German national character in comparison to the French one. Clausewitz' study of the enemy coevolved with an understanding of the self. If

²³ Clausewitz, *Considération sur la manière de faire la guerre à la France*, Hahlweg (ed.) *Schriften* Vol I, 58-63.

²⁴ Clausewitz, *Historische Briefe über die grossen Kriegereignisse im Oktober 1806*, Joachim Niemeyer (ed.) (Bonn: Dümmler, 1977).

²⁵ Clausewitz, untitled note (1805), Rothfels (ed.), *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, 4.

²⁶ Clausewitz, *Historische Briefe*, 55ff.

Clausewitz likened France to Rome before 1806, he broadened this comparison in 1807 to one in which Prussia was assigned the role of ancient Greece.

Clausewitz' time in France: studying the French 'national character' and inventing the 'German' 'national character'

It was first and foremost in his letters to Marie that Clausewitz recorded his impressions of France and his experience of captivity. They are partly written in the form of a travelogue. Indeed, the first batch of letters, which Carl wrote on his journey from Berlin to Nancy between 6 and 18 January 1807, are headed by the title 'Mein Reisejournal'.²⁷ In the last letter in this batch, which Carl penned upon his arrival in Nancy, he wrote to Marie that he was 'feeling very, very sad' and ended the travelogue with an apology for his dark mood.²⁸ In addition to the travelogue he sent to Marie, he also wrote a private travelogue.²⁹

The travelogue had been adopted by many officers and soldiers during the revolutionary and Napoleonic era, precisely because the break with ancien régime practices meant that prisoners taken on the battlefield were more often detained in their opponent's territory. Captivity was an opportunity for cultural exchange. At the same time, the format of the travelogue had already established travel literature as the preferred medium of 'the identity construction of the foreign "other" and the domestic self.'³⁰ Alexander von Humboldt had produced a more than 4,000 pages-long travel journal on his expedition to South America 1799-1804, which served as the basis for his later 30 volume-strong publication on his journey.³¹ As a literary genre, the travelogue had emerged as a scientific medium as well as a site for cultural exchange and the nascent construction of political and cultural self-identity.

Even though Clausewitz did not mark out the rest of his correspondence to Marie as a travelogue, his letters from captivity followed the characteristics of the genre in many respects. He shaped his first impression from Nancy into a poem entitled 'German and French' in which he traced back the differences between German and French national character to differences in the languages: French is

²⁷ Carl to Marie, 6-18 January 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 76-81.

²⁸ Carl to Marie, 18 January 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 81.

²⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', Hans Rothfels (ed.), *Politische Schriften und Briefe* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 23-35.

³⁰ Leighton James, 'Travel Writings and Encounters with National "Others" in the Napoleonic Wars', *History Compass* 7/4 (2009), 1247.

³¹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Le voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, fait en 1799-1804, par Alexandre de Humboldt et Aimé Bonpland* (Paris: N. Maze, 1807-1837).

a 'melodic' language that is 'suitable for jokes', whereas German is the language of liberty and fraternalism (used in the mythical Rütli oath that founded the Old Swiss confederacy). The German language echoes the sound of the swords with which the Old Confederacy defended itself against Habsburg encroachment.³² The political undercurrents of the poem are clear: the Swiss spirit of resistance was what Germany needed.³³

Language would remain Clausewitz' starting point in his observations about France and its society. He depicted the French language as affected and superficial: 'If there has ever been a language that constrains the spirit like a close-fitting robe, it is French, and the French spirit in its stilted courtesy would be horrified by such a confession [referring to a confession of her love for Carl made by Marie in her previous letter, presumably] in spite of all the real hubris of the nation.'³⁴ From Paris, he wrote to Marie about the peculiarities of the French theatre. Performances oscillated between contrived presentations and moments of sheer hysteria that struck Clausewitz as 'indecorous', even though the French did not seem to perceive them as such and were carried away by the play.³⁵ Overall, Clausewitz described the French as arrogant and lacking moral depth. In his later reflections written from Coppet in Switzerland, where he had to sojourn with August after their release from French captivity, he also added the charge that the French lacked originality and individualism – traits that for Clausewitz were also rooted in their language.³⁶

This characterization seems to sit uneasily with the revolutionary upheaval that France had undergone since 1789 – the 'real hubris of the nation', as Clausewitz referred to it. About Nancy, he complained that he was forced into 'polite

³² Carl to Marie, undated letter (between 18 and 23 January 1807), Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie von Clausewitz*, 81.

³³ Clausewitz would reinvokethe example of the Swiss in his 1809 letter to Fichte; Clausewitz, 'Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte, als Verfasser des Aufsatzes über Machiavelli im ersten Bande der "Vesta"', in Walther Malmsten Schering, *Geist und Tat: Das Vermächtnis des Soldaten und Denkers* (Remscheid: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1988), 68-74.

³⁴ Carl to Marie, 28 February 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 89.

³⁵ Carl to Marie, 29 March 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 101.

³⁶ Carl to Marie, 29 March 1807, Linnebach (ed.) *Karl und Marie*, 101. Clausewitz had most likely picked up the basics of the French language at his local school in Burg, which had adopted the curriculum of Hecker's *Realschule*, including French language tuition, in 1788. Cf. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 18; Colson, *Clausewitz*, 20. He had drafted his first brief text in French in 1805 (see footnote 16 above). In his correspondence with Marie, he reflected upon French expressions and figures of speech. In June 1807, he reported to Marie that he had read the novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* in French.

company' every day – 'ein wahres Courvisitenleben' (like visiting a Spa town), which did not at all suit his character and which he regarded as inappropriate for the situation he and August found themselves in.³⁷ Paris appeared only mildly more revolutionary to Clausewitz than rural Lorraine. Upon receiving the news that he and August had been invited to stay in Paris rather than remain in Nancy, he wrote to Marie that he abhorred the prospect of being 'violently dragged into the extreme brightness of bourgeois life'.³⁸

In the end, the French decided to accommodate Prince August and Clausewitz in Soissons, a small town to the North-East of Paris. Upon their arrival, Carl complained to Marie that he had had to devote his first three days in the town exclusively to 'meeting new people; because there is no old lady in the arguably tiny Soissons, who would not be dragged out to see whether it would be possible [for us] to help her kill some precious time for one evening, which is called "to amuse oneself". By the way, these grannies are so abundant in Soissons that one could be let to believe that it is France's old folk's home'.³⁹ What Carl described is not an encounter with a bellicose Leviathan that has unleashed the revolutionary spirits of the nation. On the contrary, it is a society constrained and held back by the shackles of its superficial, formal and stilted national character, if not completely geriatric on top.

In addition to being annoyed and offended by the French national character, Clausewitz grew increasingly exasperated about his travel companion August. In Clausewitz' eyes the prince was part of a thoroughly Frenchified cosmopolitan elite, who, owing to his cosmopolitan outlook, did not grasp the gravitas of being held in enemy hands. He socialized incessantly, thereby forcing Clausewitz to spend endless time in 'polite company', for which he was temperamentally unsuited and which he regarded with a thinly veiled disdain, not least because of August's penchant for fraternizing with the enemy. On their visits to Paris, August turned into a sightseeing maniac. Clausewitz was not opposed to making use of the opportunity to see galleries and architecture – on 8 April 1807 he wrote to Marie that he 'had been in the picture gallery quite frequently'.⁴⁰ However, August went about the cultural discovery of Paris in a way that offended Clausewitz' deeper and more sensitive (read: German) soul. On 29 March 1807 he wrote to Marie from Paris: 'We have been here for eleven days now and walk as much as our physical resources allow us, to *see* all, all, all the sights that can be found here; regardless of whether we have already consumed all moral energy and have lost all sensitivity. As far as I am concerned,

³⁷ Carl to Marie, 28 January 1807, Linnebach, *Karl and Marie*, 85.

³⁸ Carl to Marie, 23 January 1807, Linnebach, *Karl and Marie*, 81.

³⁹ Carl to Marie, 16 March 1807, Linnebach, *Karl and Marie*, 94.

⁴⁰ Carl to Marie, 8 April 1807, Linnebach, *Karl und Marie*, 108.

sightseeing no longer appeals to me. How should it be possible to grasp such a large amount of impressions and to absorb them into our innermost being in such a short time; one [impression] just simply supplants the next.’⁴¹

While Clausewitz was struck by the differences between the German and the French national characters, August seemed to fit into French society all too well: ‘Prince August, who was raised on the pap (‘Kinderbrei’) of French literature, talks about it like a final year student in his exam, and there is not one book ranging from the tragedies to the immortal shenanigans of the genial Boufflers where he would not know what place it holds in the literary canon, according to the established opinion, of course.’ Carl confessed to Marie that these conversations embarrassed him, ‘because I hardly know who Corneille, Racine and Voltaire were’. His preferred course of action in these moments was to keep silent. However, he went on to explain, ‘At times this nonsense becomes too much for me, and my pride refuses to countenance the impression of superiority that my patient silence had brought about; in those moments a dispute ensues that would seem rather silly to a true student of aesthetics; on the one side nothing but *learned ideas* [...], on the other nothing but obscure feelings and intuitions of truth.’⁴² In Clausewitz’ eyes, August was just as superficial and unoriginal as the French, and that was precisely because he had been raised in their culture at the Prussian court.

Clausewitz’ letters from Paris were impressionistic and unsystematic in their reflection on the French national character (and its supposed diametrical opposite, the German national character). His analytical spirit took over during his stay with Mme de Staël at her château Coppet near Geneva. Here he and August had to await the issue of their travel documents after their release from French captivity in August 1807. On their way to Coppet, Clausewitz began writing another travelogue, on which more below.

Even though Clausewitz was distraught about the crushing conditions that Napoleon had imposed on Prussia in the Tilsit peace treaty, his spirits seemed to be lifted by the fact that August and he were now in ‘German’ rather than in French company. Germaine de Staël was a Franco-Swiss socialite who was a vocal critic of Napoleon and an admirer of Germany, as Clausewitz highlighted in a letter to Marie: ‘It is impossible to be a greater admirer of German literature and German women than Mme de Staël. [...] I talked to her about the magnificent peculiarity of our language and that it allowed even the mediocre person to be original owing to its wealth and freedom, whereas in the French language one

⁴¹ Carl to Marie, 29 March 1807, Linnebach, *Karl und Marie*, 99.

⁴² Carl to Marie, 16 March 1807, Linnebach, *Karl und Marie*, 94-5, emphasis in original.

finds all these prefabricated thoughts and thus one always has to use forms that were coined by others.' Staël constantly discussed questions of literature and culture, but not in the way that Clausewitz perceived as the French national character. In a thinly veiled swipe at August, he remarked to Marie that 'learned flowery phrases don't impress her'.⁴³ (August continued to embarrass Clausewitz in Coppet by starting an ill-conceived affair with Mme Recamier, one of Staël's house guest, 'a common coquette', in Clausewitz' words. This seems to have led August to pursue the issue of the long-awaited travel documents in a much less urgent manner than Clausewitz would have wished.)⁴⁴

In Coppet, Clausewitz also encountered the German Romantic literary critic Wilhelm August Schlegel, who served as tutor for Staël's sons. Schlegel was the one-time hub of the Romantic circle in Jena, which had included in its informal membership Wilhelm August's brother Friedrich Schlegel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Novalis (aka Friedrich von Hardenberg), the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and the philosophy prodigy Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (the latter married Schlegel's wife Caroline after she had divorced Wilhelm August Schlegel). Clausewitz warmed immediately to Schlegel's character and company: 'Above all, I was delighted to make Schlegel's acquaintance. He is a brave, good-natured, patriotic German, who possesses a well-conditioned hate towards the French and has generally the most genuine German features, so that a person like myself is incapable of not loving him. [...] He is my sole consolation.'⁴⁵ Wilhelm August Schlegel's brother Friedrich had once remarked that 'it is incredible how generous nature is in France; it has made 30 million copies of one single individual', as Mme de Staël reported to Clausewitz.⁴⁶ This quip seemed to have amused him and to have summed up the misgivings about the French national character that he had relayed to Marie so far.

The travelogue that Clausewitz started in Chamonix on his way to Coppet is more systematic than the first travelogue that he had sent to Marie. One entry from 25 August 1807 written in Coppet offers a particularly structured discussion of Clausewitz' impression of France. According to Clausewitz, France's military might was not a result of an upsurge of patriotic and revolutionary passion among the French people. France was gripped by a 'military despotism', which looked impressive in its sheer manpower, but could not fully disguise the fact that its society was in decay: 'Just as little as the revolution with all its attributes

⁴³ Carl to Marie, 16 August 1807, in Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 132-33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Carl to Marie, 1 September 1807, in Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 134.

⁴⁵ Carl to Marie, 1 September 1807, in Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 138.

⁴⁶ Carl to Marie, 16 August 1807, in Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 133.

Clausewitz cited the same remark in his 'Reisejournal', Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', 29.

has ennobled the nation, the contemporary military despotism can achieve that. This would be a truly new phenomenon. The army has been hardened by the long war and the military spirit of this government, and a string of fortunate campaigns have infused it with the confidence of victory. This is the cause of this appearance, which dazzles the masses, and behind which a semi paralyzed France hides itself'.⁴⁷ Here Clausewitz explicitly contradicted his mentor Scharnhorst, who had written in 1799 that it was both the French national character and France's continuing military mobilization that underpinned its expansion across Europe: 'The culture of the spirit, which distinguishes this nation [the French] from others, and, even more importantly, continuous war fighting has pushed their art of war to a greater degree of perfection than that of other nations, at least as far as its implementation is concerned, if not its principles.'⁴⁸

Clausewitz made no secret of the fact that he 'hated' the French. But after he had had first hand experience of their society and their political system, he did not fear them as much: 'Both in France and in Germany there is a widespread opinion that the French nation had acquired, through the revolution with its enthusiasm and its terror, through [France's] victories, finally through the subsequent despotism, such a momentum, such a military tendency, that it would be impossible to resist such a nation. This opinion is erroneous.'⁴⁹ According to Clausewitz, the revolution had not transformed French society: 'He who had studied Machiavelli attentively would have predicted the outcome of the revolution. A corrupted people is not capable of freedom, this remarkable man said. Such was the nature of the political enthusiasm, and such did it show itself in war. How can one neatly prove the existence of a pitched enthusiasm for the fatherland, of an invincible heroism, from the revolutionary wars?'⁵⁰ He concluded: 'It is not at all in the nature of things, much less grounded in the wealth of historical evidence, that a nation could elevate itself/rise (sich erheben) within a few years. This is as likely as the sudden cooling of the atmosphere, which the trivial weather-prophets claim to have noticed for some years.'⁵¹

In an essay that Clausewitz finalized in November 1807, after his return to Berlin, he further systematized his thoughts about the differences in 'national

⁴⁷ Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', 32. Cf. Colson, *Clausewitz*, 86.

⁴⁸ Gerhard von Scharnhorst, '309. Aufzeichnung', in *Private und dienstliche Schriften vol 2: Stabschef und Reformer*, Johannes Kunisch (ed.) (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 765.

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', 29.

⁵⁰ Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', 30.

⁵¹ Clausewitz, 'Aus dem Reisejournal von 1807', 32.

character' between these two nations.⁵² When Clausewitz wrote of the two nations and their respective national characters, in his travelogue and, most prominently, in the essay, entitled 'The Germans and the French', he increasingly pitted the 'Germans' - as opposed to Prussia - against the French. Some have interpreted this as an indication that for Clausewitz 'the political subject shifted from the Prussian state to the German nation'.⁵³ However, as we shall see, the German 'national character' - its individualism - was the precise reason for Germany's decentralized and disunited political character, and hence, to a certain degree, for its political weakness.

'The Germans and the French' opens with an analytical account of the French Revolution. The French, being superficially 'clever' but lacking moral depth, had been contented for as long as their rulers delivered the basic essentials of 'national fortune': 'national honour, personal dignity and the splendour of the court'. Once these attributes were lost under successive generations of Bourbon kings, they rose up. However, the revolution was only a blip; and the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte showed that the French had lost nothing of their penchant for extravagant and vainglorious leaders: 'We now realize very clearly that, as much as [the French] embraced the external forms of liberty during the revolution, little did they grasp the essence of republicanism. Bonaparte, who is only concerned with France's fortune as far as it is compatible with his imperiousness, but who, at the same time, has satisfied vanity and superficial reasoning through his victories and through his newspapers, finds faithful subjects in the French once again.'⁵⁴

Clausewitz repeated many of the dichotomous observations that he had already included in his letters and his travelogue in 'The Germans and the French'. The French were polite to the point of being stifled by rigid customs, but this politeness was a thin veneer that hardly covered up their cruelty, their emotional imbalance, their vanity, but also their lack of ambition.⁵⁵ The lack of ambition turned the French into pliable subjects, while their easily aroused passions made them 'an excellent political instrument'.⁵⁶ The Germans, in contrast, were more profound and more individualistic; they were 'cordial, faithful and honest'.⁵⁷ The 'spirit of critique' was at home in Germany, which allowed the Germans to make well-reflected decisions. This is why the Germans - not the French! - were

⁵² Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', Rothfels (ed.), *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, 35-51.

⁵³ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), note 34.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 39.

⁵⁵ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 40-43.

⁵⁶ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 41.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 46.

ideally suited to a system of a republic. Clausewitz even opined that the creation of a republic could produce an increase in national identification with Germany, so that the unification of Germany as a state would produce Germany as a nation. However, two factors stood in the way of this development: Germany's exposed geopolitical position in Europe, with major powers on either side, and the need for political unity at all times, and the innate German individualism, which meant that there was no pan-German political trust and loyalty.⁵⁸

'The Germans and the French' culminates in the equation of France with the Roman empire and Germany with ancient Greece: 'It is precisely this preponderance of the French over the Germans in terms of the practical conditions of political life, which Rome seemed to enjoy over the Greeks, just as it cannot be denied that the Greeks possessed a richer and more beautiful individuality, which is equivalent to the German superiority over the French. [...] The Greeks had reached the peak of cultural development earlier than the Romans, who never matched them in any peaceful art. They were certainly always superior to the Romans in terms of the richness of their intellect.'⁵⁹ Like Rome, Napoleonic France was an empire, while ancient Greece – like Germany – was split into different polities. Even if Rome had lasted 500 years, it was never able to supersede the cultural heights that ancient Greece had reached. The implications were clear: military victory was not equivalent to cultural victory, and empires were doomed to failure. If Clausewitz had started his musings about the French with the observation that, unlike Rome, France tried to assert its cultural preponderance over the rest of Europe, he ended them with the conclusion that its cultural prowess was vain, hollow, and ultimately unsustainable. Like Rome, France could dominate Europe for a long time, but it was always already a power in cultural decline.

Evaluation

One thing Clausewitz was sure of at the end of his captivity in France and his stay at Coppet: he had to leave his post as Prince August's adjutant. On 15 September 1807, he wrote to Marie from Coppet asking her to pass on a letter to Scharnhorst, in which he requested his help to achieve a change in his position.⁶⁰

However, Clausewitz' experience of 1807 was meaningful beyond his conclusion that he needed a career change. First, it is important to place his experience against the backdrop of change and continuity. Clausewitz and his

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 46-47.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, 'Die Deutschen und die Franzosen', 51; cf. Colson, *Clausewitz*, 87.

⁶⁰ Carl to Marie, 15 September 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 137.

contemporaries had witnessed dramatic changes in Europe between 1793 and 1806, with 1806 seemingly sealing Prussia's downfall. And yet, Clausewitz highlighted instances of continuity in his letters and his travelogues rather than manifestations of change: the conditions of his captivity resembled old regime practices more than anything groundbreakingly new. France itself seemed to be sleepy and paralysed by stilted traditions. Prince August represented Frenchified aristocratic decadence. While Clausewitz could not wait to return to Prussia and contribute to its revival, August vainly chased romantic adventures and was apparently in no rush to return to the Prussian court.

This led Clausewitz to invert the roles of France and Germany. The France that he had encountered was a backward place, Clausewitz argued. Like Rome, it may have acquired great administrative and military power, but it was already an empire in decline. No cultural or spiritual renewal could be expected to emerge from France. Germany, however, as a cultural nation, even though it was politically split into a myriad of different states and principalities, held the source of a true spiritual revival, the benchmark of which was ancient Greece. Germany was the forward-looking nation, the one whose cultural weight would endure and at some point supersede the predominance of France, just like Rome could not eclipse ancient Greek culture. Germany's role was essentially tragic – and this was no accident, given that German philhellenism around 1800 had resulted in a heightened interest in the Greek tragedy: its very best features – the individualism of its people and their critical spirit – prevented it from unifying and from becoming a political heavyweight in Europe.

From a contemporary perspective, it is hard to relate to Clausewitz' outspoken patriotism and explicit hatred of the French. This chimes with a Clausewitz interpretation that became dominant in the 1970s, which emphasized the 'rational' side of Clausewitz' view of war as an instrument of policy.⁶¹ Yet when Clausewitz later, in his famous trinity in chapter 1 of book I of *On War*, described 'hatred and enmity' as the 'essential violence of its element', we have to assume that he partly drew upon personal experience.⁶² At the same time, the nationalization of war had thrown up the question of political identities, and, to a large extent, Clausewitz was reacting to questions that he had to confront as a result of the nationalization of war.

Clausewitz followed the established literary genre of the travelogue and used it as a springboard to 'discover' the character of a foreign nation and to construct

⁶¹ Strachan, Hew, 'Clausewitz en anglais: La Césure de 1976', Laure Bardiès and Martin Motte (eds) *De la guerre? Clausewitz et la pensée stratégique contemporaine*, (Paris: Economica, 2008), 94–122.

⁶² Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, book I, chapter 1, Werner Hahlweg (ed.) (Bonn: Ferdinand Dümmlers Verlag, 1980), 213.

the national identity of the self – Germany – at the same time. This was an established feature of the genre, which Clausewitz followed intuitively in his letters from France. During his stay at Coppet, the construction and juxtaposition of the French and German national characters became more systematic. This was no coincidence given that his main company at Coppet were August Wilhelm Schlegel and the hostess Mme de Staël. Both had been exposed to the nascent historicism of Johann Gottfried Herder. In his early oeuvre, *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (*Fragments on Recent German Literature*, 1776/77), Herder had written ‘Each nation speaks according to how it thinks, and thinks according to how it speaks.’⁶³ Herder was an early critic of the Enlightenment assumption according to which the human condition was universal rather than divided into different cultures or nations. In his 1785 publication *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*), Herder insisted ‘that the ideal constitution is individual, reflecting the character and the way of life of a people’.⁶⁴

August Wilhelm Schlegel knew Herder personally. Herder had lived in Weimar between 1776 and his death in 1803, and had been part of the wider Romantic Jena/Weimar network with Schlegel at its centre. Incidentally, it had been Herder who, in his role as superintendent of the Lutheran church, had to grant Schlegel’s formal divorce from Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel. Schlegel’s appraisal of German literature in the European context reflects the impact of a Herderian historical anthropology.⁶⁵

When Clausewitz met Staël in 1807, she was already a well-established writer. Clausewitz had read her *Corinne ou l’Italie* during his time in France, as he reported to Marie.⁶⁶ *Corinne* took up the difference in Nordic and Southern European mentalities, which again points towards Herder’s historical anthropology. In 1807, Staël started writing *De l’Allemagne*, the intention of which was ‘to point out what France did not have, but might have, if it let another nation be its guide and its inspiration’ – the other nation of course being Germany.⁶⁷ The inversion that Clausewitz undertook by ‘unmasking’ France as a backward nation and identifying Germany as the beacon of cultural achievement was hence a well established cultural trope in anti-Napoleonic circles.

⁶³ Quoted in Frederic Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 108.

⁶⁴ Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 159.

⁶⁵ Roger Paulin, *The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel: Cosmopolitan of Art and Poetry* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2016), 221, 267. Cf. Claude de Conter, ‘Kulturtransfer bei Herder und bei den Brüdern Schlegel: Eine Herausforderung für die nationale Geschichtsschreibung’, in *KulturPoetik*, 10/1 (2010), 25-47.

⁶⁶ Carl to Marie, 2 June 1807, Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 118.

⁶⁷ Paulin, *August Wilhelm Schlegel*, 340.

Both Schlegel and Staël had an ultimately cosmopolitan understanding of national cultures. Schlegel believed that the German language was an ideal medium for cultural transfers across Europe because it was an excellent translation language.⁶⁸ Staël advocated a cultural transfer from Germany towards France, in order to save that latter from decay. Both were convinced that a revival of German culture and literature could strengthen and reinvigorate European culture writ large.

Clausewitz shared this cosmopolitanism in a certain sense, though not in its political implications. For him, Prussia's – and Germany's – resurrection had to be achieved by rolling back the cultural influence that France had had on Europe for centuries. National identity was not necessarily bound to ethnicity, but it did intersect with one's place in the social order. Prussia's problem was that its court had been thoroughly Frenchified and had therefore succumbed to the same degree of decadence that had characterized the French nation in its entirety. With this move, Clausewitz introduced a further twist in the co-evolving construction of the identity of the 'other' and the 'self': the identification of the 'other' inside the 'self'. If Schlegel and Staël thought that Europe had to become more German in order to save itself from France, Clausewitz' conclusion was that first of all, the Prussian court had to become less French in order to enable Prussia to resurrect itself. Clausewitz' challenge to the Prussian king in 1812, when he left the Prussian army to fight with Russia against Napoleon, thus had roots that reached far beyond the whim of the moment.

Even though Clausewitz' letters to Marie from France and from Switzerland contain his repeated lament about Prussia's hopeless situation, the general trend was that the more Clausewitz got to know France, the less he feared it as an opponent. He was distraught upon receiving the news of the Tilsit peace treaty and relayed to Marie that he anticipated the worst – 'the French army keeping the Prussian provinces under occupation'.⁶⁹ But the impression of French invincibility had vanished. Confronted in part by his status as prisoner of war with the question of political identity and unable to devote any efforts to the practical liberation of Prussia, he increasingly clung on to the comparative analysis of the French and the German national characters. The equation of this confrontation with the juxtaposition of Rome and Greece provided further solace to Clausewitz. Here he followed again common tropes put forward by Romantic and humanist circles in Germany. The historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann in his seminal *History of Ancient Art* (1764) had introduced the idea that the Roman empire was not at the zenith of antiquity, rather, it signified antiquity's late

⁶⁸ Conter, 'Kulturtransfer', 37.

⁶⁹ Carl to Marie, 31 July 1807, in Linnebach (ed.), *Karl und Marie*, 131.

decaying stages. At the heart of ancient Greece's culture had been freedom, and that was what had made Greek art superior to anything Rome had achieved, because the latter suppressed freedom.⁷⁰ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who started giving his addresses to the German nation beginning in December 1807, just a few weeks after Clausewitz had edited 'The Germans and the French', followed the path that Winckelmann had established and that Clausewitz had followed as well.⁷¹

While for Fichte, it followed that Germany had to resist as a nation, Clausewitz never drew this political conclusion. Upon his return to Berlin, he immersed himself in the practical efforts among his fellow military reformers in order to strive for Prussia's liberation. For Clausewitz, institutions such as the Prussian *Landwehr* ultimately counted more than the lofty promise of cultural transfer or the cold comfort that, even though Prussia and the rest of Germany had been subdued by Napoleon, German culture would live on after France had met its inevitable downfall. However, in Clausewitz's strategic thought, the idea of nationalism as a spark to popular resistance took hold, even though, after 1807, Clausewitz regarded resistance against Napoleon and the unification of Germany as two separate – and not equally desirable – projects. His desperate and sometimes embittered search for ways to curb Napoleon's expansion across Europe led him to embrace the promise of people's war in his writings from the reform years, which, in turn, deeply influenced his view that defence was the stronger form of war in his mature writings, in particular *On War*.⁷² The change in tone on the advantages of the defence is palpable in one of Clausewitz's first texts after his return from captivity, entitled 'Ueber die künftigen Kriegs-Operationen Preußens gegen Frankreich' (On Prussia's future military operations against France'). In many ways, the text echoed the concerns of the *Considérations* of 1805, only this time pondering the options of a collaboration of European powers after the end of the war of the fourth coalition. However, a new element emerged: 'My idea is to sacrifice a state that one is no longer able to defend in order to save its army.' Such an army would no longer be a defending army, as there was, strictly speaking, nothing left to defend, but, because of its continued existence and offensive threat, it would tie down sizable proportions of the enemy's forces: 'However, this defence [defence against the persisting army of a defeated state] is not defence proper; rather, it is something much

⁷⁰ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art* (New York: F. Ungar, 1969).

⁷¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, George Moore (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.

⁷² Cf. Sibylle Scheipers, *On Small War: Carl von Clausewitz and People's War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 52ff., 109ff.

more difficult, namely, *guarding the offensive army*.⁷³ Clausewitz still had some intellectual terrain to cover before he was able to express the dynamic that made defence the stronger form of war, but the roots laid there.⁷⁴

After 1807, Clausewitz met pan-German efforts at liberation either with indifference or with reservations: the break up of the Confederation of the Rhine in November 1813 and its members' subsequent joining of the sixth coalition did not warrant a mention in Carl's letters to Marie, while he later blamed the Lützow free corps, a pan-German unit formed in 1813, for inspiring the nationalist Wartburg movement, which Clausewitz held responsible for the political 'agitations' that shook Prussia and other German territories from 1817 to 1819.⁷⁵ Finally, his reaction to the Polish question reflected that, for Clausewitz, liberation and people's war demanded certain qualities and a certain stage in the evolution of a nation: in *On War*, he attributed the partitions of Poland to the fact that its leaders were not willing to evolve Poland from a 'tartar state' into a European one, and to amalgamate its people.⁷⁶ Clausewitz did not support the Polish November uprising of 1830-31 and denounced it as the brainchild of cosmopolitan ideologues rather than the expression of the passion of a nation.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The France that Clausewitz encountered in captivity struck him as just as traditional, even backward, as the conditions of his captivity. The revolution had not taken hold in French society; it had been a short-lived upheaval that had arguably increased the power of the French state, but had not changed the mindset and the culture of the French people. Republicanism was ill-suited to the French national character. The French were trapped in stilted societal customs. They were vain, yet they lacked ambition. They were superficially polite and refined, but their fickle nature lent itself to sudden irrational outbursts of passion. Here Clausewitz followed directly in Herder's footsteps, who had argued that every people ought to have a constitution and a government that suited their own national character.

⁷³ Clausewitz, Ueber die künftigen Kriegs-Operationen Preußens gegen Frankreich', Hahlweg (ed.) *Schriften*, 81, 86.

⁷⁴ On the development of the device of defence and attack, see Scheipers, *On Small War*, 128ff.

⁷⁵ Clausewitz, 'Umtriebe', Rothfels (ed.) *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, 153-94. Cf. Scheipers, *On Small War*, 104ff.

⁷⁶ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, book VI, chapter 6, 641f.

⁷⁷ Cf. Scheipers, *On Small War*, 101f.

Clausewitz would later change his mind regarding the lasting impact of the nationalization of war that the French Revolution had provoked. In book VIII of *On War*, he observed that Napoleon had perfected France as a 'military power grounded in the power of the people in its entirety'. He went on to speculate on whether people's war was to become the predominant way of war in the future, or whether cabinet wars would become the norm again. He left this question open, but warned contemporaries that the sheer possibility of people's war had changed strategic thinking and planning for good.⁷⁸ The historical event that may have changed Clausewitz' mind was the war on the Iberian peninsula, which made him realise that the nationalization of war triggered popular insurrections in occupied territory. The revolution may have kicked off a discourse of nationalization, but with France's expansion across Europe, the revolution had lost the monopoly over the nationalization of war. Irregular forces fighting against Napoleon had finished what the revolution had started, but was not able to complete.

It is not hard to see that Clausewitz' 'description' of the French national character is actually a construction. It developed in lockstep with the construction of a 'German' self-identity, in which each mostly negative attribute of the French national character was matched with a mostly positive feature of the German national character. Psychologically, it is easy to understand where Clausewitz was coming from: after the experience of a crushing defeat, he took solace in a pronounced patriotism and clung on to indications that Prussia could ultimately liberate itself from French domination.⁷⁹

Yet, if we stop at this psychological interpretation, we miss important insights into the way in which captivity was a consequential experience for Clausewitz. He started to record his observations in an unsystematic fashion in his letters to Marie and in his travelogues. Initially, the genre of the travelogue provided the form for his observations. Clausewitz followed the established tropes of the genre by presenting his captivity as a 'discovery' of the foreign other and the narration of the identity of the self. During his stay at Coppet, his thoughts on France and Germany became much more systematic. His letters to Marie suggest that he spent a large amount of his time in Coppet in debates with August Wilhelm Schlegel and Mme de Staël, both of whom had made a career out of speculating on the differences between the German and the French national characters. While Clausewitz did not agree with Schlegel and Staël's cosmopolitanism, they did provide him with more systematic arguments and interpretations, which he eagerly used to make sense of his observations. He took up central elements of the anti-Napoleonic Romantic and humanist

⁷⁸ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, book VIII, chapter 3B, 971-3.

⁷⁹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, 119.

discourse, such as the idea that the French Revolution had shown the undesirability of political revolutions and that only Germany could be the source of a proper spiritual renewal. He also harkened back to the equation of France with Rome and Germany with Greece that had been inspired by the work of Winckelmann.

Ultimately, what this interpretative framework suggested to Clausewitz was that Prussia was not entirely lost yet. The narrative of the German national character convinced Clausewitz that the liberation of Prussia was possible. This gave a great impetus to the work he took up as a military reformer upon his return to Paris. The textual link that indicates this can be found in Clausewitz' 1812 *Bekenntnisdenschrift* – one of the core texts of the Prussian military reform movement. In the third 'confession', Clausewitz integrated a lengthy section that revisited the differences in the French and German national characters, with the ultimate aim to show that a people's war against French occupation was possible.⁸⁰

At the same time, Clausewitz' interest in the German nation as a potential political subject waned after his return to Berlin. Even in his writings from captivity, he had never been fully convinced that the German nation could resist France – precisely because it was a central part of the German national character that it was individualistic, giving rise to political fragmentation. After 1807, Greece ceased to be Clausewitz' historical reference point on which he could pin his hopes for liberation. In his 1809 letter to Fichte, Clausewitz returned to the ideal of the Swiss confederation as a reference point for the aspiration of liberation.⁸¹ Ultimately, in the young Clausewitz' mind, war was what produced a new political subject, not culture or national character, even though they played a role in allowing a nation to rise up against foreign occupation. The confession memorandum and the plans that Clausewitz developed regarding a *Landwehr* and a *Landsturm* were geared to Prussia, not Germany.

⁸⁰ Clausewitz, 'Bekenntnisdenschrift', Rothfels (ed.), *Politische Schriften und Briefe*, 111-13. Cf. Scheipers, *On Small War*, chapter 2.

⁸¹ Clausewitz, 'Ein ungenannter Militär an Fichte', 70.

